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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on read-aloud programs reveals two studies that extensively examine program content and practices and teacher procedures. The first study, conducted in 1969, compiled responses from 582 intermediate teachers of grades four, five, and six throughout the United States. The second study, conducted in 1979, surveyed 29 kindergarten teachers in a large northern Minnesota city. Findings from the studies showed that in both kindergarten and intermediate grades the largest category of books teachers read orally to children is fiction. In the intermediate grades study, the quality of teacher selected books was determined by checking the list of titles against two standard bibliographies: "Children's Catalog," and "The Elementary School Library Collections." The kindergarten study used a set of criteria for evaluating the quality of plot, characterization, and style of picture story books. In consideration of personal teacher evaluation of a given book, two facts stood out: 85% to 100% of the teachers relied on their own knowledge in book selection; but in regard to quality of literature chosen, only one-fourth to two-fifths of the books selected for the read-aloud programs were categorized as top quality. The most frequently used book selection aids were "The Instructor," for intermediate teachers, and the "Bibliography of Books for Children" for kindergarten teachers. (HOD)

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The What and How of Book Selection: Research Findings

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"The What and How of Book Selection: Research Findings"

In "Search for the Real Thing: Among the Millions and Billions and Trillions of Books," Virginia Haviland (1961) reminds us that the selectors of books for children--parents, teachers, and librarians--have an awesome task; the large number of books (approximately 2,500 books in children's literature published each year [Huck, 1979]) and the wide range of possibilities facing us today make this problem of choice even more time consuming and difficult than it was twenty years ago. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, Haviland insists that selectors of books for children need to know "the real thing" as distinct from "fool's gold." The sad truth of the matter is, however, that these parents, teachers, and librarians ultimately responsible for the selection of children's books are simply not finding "the real thing" and are not doing an adequate job; unfortunately, the children are the losers. Moreover, staggering as the job truly is, it is not an impossible one: there are methods and means available to book selectors which would enable them to make efficient, informed, and valid choices--choices in which the children come out as winners."

First, the scope of the problem. Three aspects of the present situation will be examined in this paper: 1) the types of literature teachers read aloud to children; 2) the quality of the books selected for reading to children; and 3) the sources teachers use to select books for children.

A review of the literature reveals a large body of research relative to the general area of children's literature and a few studies that investigate specific aspects of read-aloud programs. There are, however, two studies that extensively examine the content, practices and procedures of teachers in read-aloud programs. In 1969, Tom compiled questionnaire responses from 582 intermediate teachers of grades four, five, and six throughout the United States. A decade later, Sword (1979) surveyed twenty-nine kindergarten teachers in a large

Northern Minnesota city. Both Tom and Sword gathered similar types of information on the content, practices and procedures in read-aloud programs.¹

What Do We Know About the Types of Literature Teachers Read-Aloud to Children?

In the intermediate grades, teachers read aloud more fiction than nonfiction to children--about 94 percent fiction and 6 percent nonfiction (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Categories of Prose Read Aloud in Grades 4-6 and Kindergartens

Categories of Prose	Intermediate Teachers		Kindergarten Teachers	
	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentage of Occurrences	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentage of Occurrences
Fiction (story)	1473	93.9	216	71.3
Nonfiction	95	6.1	42	13.9
Mood	--	--	18	5.9
Beginning Reader	--	--	27	8.9
Total	1568	100%	303	100%

The kindergarten study indicates that teachers also read more fiction--71 percent in comparison to 14 percent nonfiction. Other types of literature being read to kindergarten children at the story period are mood books (6%) and beginning readers (9%). In the kindergarten study, approximately one out of every ten books selected during the story period of kindergarten teachers was a beginning (i.e., restricted vocabulary) reader. But the largest category of books teachers read orally to children in both kindergarten and intermediate grades is fiction (story). (Such a finding is encouraging because it is

¹Throughout the remainder of this paper the studies will be referred to by the terms "intermediate grade study" and the "kindergarten study."

consistent with the attitude among scholars in the field that the importance of story books needs to be re-emphasized [Cullinan, 1981; Sutherland, et al, 1981]).

About 50 percent of the fiction read aloud to intermediate aged children is realistic fiction; 22 percent is biography and historical fiction; about 13 percent is fantasy; and still less is folk literature. For kindergarten children the frequency of the three types of fiction is 69 percent fantasy; 19 percent realistic; and 13 percent folk literature (see Table 2).

Table 2

Comparison of Categories of Fiction Books Read in Grades 4-6 and Kindergartens

Categories of Fiction	Intermediate Teachers		Kindergarten Teachers	
	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentage of Occurrences	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentage of Occurrences
Realistic	766	52.0	41	19.0
Fantasy	195	13.4	148	68.5
Folk Literature	129	8.7	27	12.5
Biography and Historical	319	21.6	--	--
Science Fiction	16	1.1	(Category for humor was not separated)	
Humor	48	3.2		
Total	1473	100%	216	100%

These findings can be explained in terms of the developing child. The child in Piaget's preoperational stage of development engages in a great deal of imaging, fantasizing, and animistic types of behavior. The intermediate-age child is reaching outward, and realistic fiction is helping him/her to discover

fresh enjoyment in everyday life and to increase awareness of his/her ever expanding world.

The most popular book read aloud to children by intermediate level teachers (see Table 3) was Charlotte's Web (White, 1952); the next most popular books were The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Twain, 1876, 1884), and The Little House in the Big Woods (Wilder, 1932). Popular books read aloud in one intermediate grade were often popular books read in the other grades as well. Twenty percent of all prose read to children in grades four, five, and six was classified as classics.

Table 3

A Selected List of Preferred Books Read to Pupils in Grades 4-6
(Teachers N = 582)

Title and Author	Date of First Publication	Frequency of Reading
<u>Charlotte's Web</u> , White, E.	1952	50
<u>Adventures of Tom Sawyer</u> , Twain, M.	1876	39
<u>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</u> , Twain, M.	1884	24
<u>Little House in the Big Woods</u> , Wilder, L.	1932	21
<u>A Christmas Carol</u> , Dickens, C.	1843	20
<u>Caddie Woodlawn</u> , Brink, C.	1936	18
<u>Old Yeller</u> , Gipson	1956	15
<u>Island of the Blue Dolphins</u> , O'Dell, S.	1960	13
<u>Jungle Book</u> , Kipling, R.	1894	13
<u>Story of Doctor Dolittle</u> , Lofting, H.	1920	13

The most preferred books chosen to be read aloud by most kindergarten teachers (see Table 4) were: The Snowy Day (Keats, 1962), The Gingerbread Boy (folk literature), The Little Engine That Could (Piper, 1930), The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes (Heyward, 1939), Little Toot (Gramatky, 1939), and The Tale of Peter Rabbit (Potter, 1902).

Table 4
A Selected List of Preferred Books Read to Kindergarten Pupils
(Teachers N=25)

Title and Author	Date of First Publication	Number of Teachers Selecting Book
<u>The Snowy Day</u> , Keats, E.	1960	13
<u>The Gingerbread Boy</u>	Traditional	12
<u>The Little Engine That Could</u> , Piper, W.	1930	12
<u>The Country Bunny and the Little Golden Shoes</u> , Heyward, D.	1939	11
<u>Little Toot</u> , Gramatky, H.	1939	10
<u>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</u> , Potter, B.	1902	10
<u>The Carrot Seed</u> , Krauss, R.	1945	9
<u>Harry the Dirty Dog</u> , Zion, G.	1956	9
<u>Katy and the Big Snow</u> , Burton, V.	1943	9
<u>Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel</u> , Burtor, V.	1939	9

It should be noted that the children's stories selected on both the intermediate and kindergarten levels commonly have relatively old publication dates. Most of the books in both studies were at least ten years old at the time the studies took place. Eighty-seven percent of the 303 most preferred books identified in the kindergarten study were over ten years old, and 88½ percent of the twenty-three most preferred intermediate books were over ten years old. Although there are many books of the past that are as meaningful and appealing to children today, we may well ask the questions, "Why are few contemporary books on the list?"

What Do We Know About the Quality of the Books Selected to Read-Aloud to Children?

In the intermediate grade study, the prose quality was determined by checking the list of titles against two standard bibliographies: Children's Catalog and The Elementary School Library Collections. A four-point scale was used and the quality ratings found in the standard bibliographies were assigned

to each title. Table 5 shows that almost twice as much fiction was rated as the highest quality (level 4, 41 percent) as was rated as the lowest quality (level 1, 22 percent).

Table 5
Quality Level of Fiction Read Aloud in Grades 4-6
(N=1473)

Form	Levels of Quality			
	4	3	2	1
	%	%	%	%
Fiction	40.6	17.0	14.0	22.3

The kindergarten study used a different instrument to determine quality of the literature to read to children. A set of criteria for evaluating the quality of plot, characterization, and style of picture story books was developed by the investigator.² (The instrument made no attempt to evaluate the illustrations in the picture story books.) Using the Sword criteria, the stories read aloud to kindergarten children were 23 percent high quality, 60 percent medium and 17 percent low quality (see Table 6).

²The content validity of the instrument was established by expert opinion in children's literature. The interrater reliability of the instrument was statistically significant as shown by the Kendall Coefficient of Concordance, $W(10,10) = .80$ $p < .01$. The concurrent validity, which was also assessed, was indexed by the Spearman Correlation Coefficient as $r_s(10) = .67 < .05$.

Table 6
Quality Level of Story (Fiction) Read Aloud in Kindergartens
(N=30)

Form	Levels of Quality		
	3	2	1
	%	%	%
Story (Fiction)	23	60	17

What Do We Know About the Sources Teachers Use to Select Books for Children?

Eighty-five percent of the teachers in the intermediate grade study used personal knowledge as a basis for selection of books, but also accepted suggestions from pupils, school librarians, and other teachers (see Table 7).

Table 7
Comparison of Human Sources of Book Selection Reported by Teachers in
Grades 4-6 and Kindergarten

Human Sources Used for Read-Aloud Sessions	Percentage of Intermediate Teachers Reporting Sources N = 582	Percentage of Kindergarten Teachers Reporting Sources N = 25
Personal Knowledge	84.6	100
Pupil Suggestions	46.0	84
School Librarian	30.9	72 (school and public
Other Teachers	27.9	68 librarians)
Curriculum Director		12
Public Librarian	6.3	--
Other	10.8	8

Materials used by intermediate teachers tended to be ones that were close at hand, such as stories from textbooks. Seventy-five percent of the books read to children came from teachers' personal collections. Teachers, however, need

to be mindful of the quality of these selections and to consider the impact their choice has on the children's own book selection.

The kindergarten study revealed similar findings. Table 7 indicates that 100 percent of the teachers sampled used their own personal knowledge in selecting books; 84 percent used books brought by children; 72 percent used librarians and 68 percent used other teachers as human sources in choosing books for the read-aloud session.

When kindergarten teachers were asked to enumerate the important reasons why they do not read to children, ironically 44 percent of the teachers replied, "Teacher's lack of knowledge about children's literature." In response to the question, "If you were offered inservice training about children's literature, on what topics would you like further information?" Sixty percent of the teachers responded, "How to select quality books." The intermediate teachers also expressed this same need.

The foregoing evidence suggests, then, that at the present time book selection for children is a problem of considerable magnitude. These persons responsible for the task do not feel capable of it and are not, in fact, doing a competent piece of work. There are, however, alternatives to this general ineptitude if book selectors are willing to take advantage of them. In the main, the most effective resources in this field fall into three categories: a personal grounding in the criteria used in evaluating literary works, prose or poetry; an awareness of the best book selection guides currently in print; and a willingness to use the consultative services of a qualified librarian and his/her staff.

In any consideration of personal teacher-evaluation of a given book, two facts stand out: eighty-five to one hundred percent of the teachers surveyed

relied on their own knowledge in book selection; but in regard to quality of literature chosen, only one-fourth to two-fifths of the books selected for the read-aloud programs were categorized as top quality. Clearly, then, many teachers who rely solely on their own ability to critique literature have no such ability! This finding demands that students preparing to teach elementary school be provided with course work in the basic elements of literature in order to enable them to evaluate children's literature more effectively and choose more discriminately. (The basic elements employed in such evaluations can be found outlined in Sword [1983], as well as in other sources.) Note certainly must be taken, too, of the unfortunate fact that a large number of teachers surveyed use selections provided by children themselves as a major source of reading aloud to children. This should be of serious concern to educators. Many experts in the field of children's literature conclude that children are unreliable sources in recognizing fine quality literature. Children are not born with good tastes, but need their tastes to be developed and nurtured. On the other hand, we need to be reminded that a book that does not appeal to children is a poor selection even though we as adults extol its virtues of excellence. Popularity of a book and its literary quality do not have to be antagonistic: it is important for the adult to be mindful of selecting books that not only have qualities that appeal to children, but meet literary standards as well. Also, it is essential for the teachers to preview a book before sharing it with children.

In the kindergarten study, it was unexpected that approximately one of every ten books selected during the story period by kindergarten teachers was a beginning (restricted vocabulary) reader. Beginning readers are basically written for the purpose of helping children learn to read. Although a few books in this category may be classed as literature, most do not begin to achieve

this level of excellence. Intermediate teachers also use stories from textbooks. These stories, too, are limited in the opportunity they offer for vocabulary development at the intermediate level. Many authorities in the field of education are concerned about the substitution of subliterary experiences for literary experiences. (The classic read-aloud studies such as Chomsky [1973], Cohen [1968], and Durkin [1966] have supported the premise that sharing excellent literature with children is an effective and important means of helping children develop general language and reading competence.) It seems obvious that teachers who are personally knowledgeable in the standards by which any literature may be validly evaluated will not be guilty of making those kinds of poor choices on behalf of the children for whom they are responsible.

About one-fourth to one-half of the teachers in the intermediate and kindergarten classes use the second resource, book selection aids, to assist them in choosing new books as well as books for the read-aloud sessions.

Of published sources used by intermediate teachers to select books for the read-aloud period, The Instructor was the most popular magazine. An average of 27 percent of the teachers reported using The Instructor, a number just slightly more than the percentage of teachers who reported nonusage of any publication. An encouraging note is that 15 percent used Elementary English (now entitled Language Arts), a professional journal stressing the language arts. In the kindergarten study all book selection aids listed were heard of or read about by 20-72 percent of the respondents (see Table 8). The most familiar source (72%) was the publication entitled Bibliography of Books for Children published by the Association for Childhood Education International, yet only 44 percent of the teachers actually used it. The least known and used book aid was The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, with 20 percent of the kindergarten teachers having hear of it, while 16 percent actually used it.

Table 8
Comparison of Published Sources Used by Teachers in Selecting
Books for Read-Aloud Sessions in Grades 4-6 and Kindergartens

Published Sources Used for Read-Aloud Sessions	Percentage of Intermediate Teachers Using Sources N = 582	Percentage of Kindergarten Teachers Using Sources N = 25
<u>Adventuring with Books</u>	-	20
<u>Bibliography of Books for Children</u>	-	44
<u>Booklist</u>	-	28
<u>Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books</u>	-	16
<u>Children's Catalog</u>	22.8	36
<u>Grade Teacher</u>	21.9	-
<u>Horn Book Magazine</u>	-	20
<u>The Instructor</u>	26.8	-
<u>Language Arts (Elementary English)</u>	14.89	16
<u>NEA Journal</u>	21.3	-
<u>Notable Children's Books</u>	-	28
<u>School Library Journal</u>	-	28
None	23.8	(Information not requested)

These book selection aids, developed by experts in the field, are, without question, very important resources which teachers should be encouraged to use. Children's literature is as important as any other developmental program in the curriculum. Teachers are expected to be informed about the tools needed to carry out the teaching of reading and mathematics: the same should be true of children's literature. This does not in any way negate the use of human resources such as librarians, but a background in published sources promotes a more autonomous professional teacher who is capable of using the librarian's services more judiciously to bring rich literary experiences to the classroom. College and university courses in children's literature should provide knowledge about and experiences with book selection aids. Teachers should receive in-service training to familiarize them with selection tools in order to compensate for the

possible lack of such training earlier and in order to keep them up-to-date with the newest publications available to them. Book selection aids should be readily available to teachers in their school libraries so that they have easy access to the tools necessary for the highest caliber instruction. It is important for teachers to select carefully the books they read to children or the activities they use to extend the children's experience with literature, but the benefits of sound selection can be lost or undermined if the teacher does not coordinate them within a larger planned program for teaching of literature. It may be noted that ten percent of books read aloud in the intermediate grade study were books that could be correlated with social studies. It is important to keep uppermost in mind that with thoughtfully selected goals and areas of concentration, literature can be and should be valued for its own sake and not merely used as content for subject matter areas. It is recommended that not only individual teachers provide for a planned literature program, but that this also be carried out on a school-wide basis through established curriculum policies.

It is understandable that in a busy schedule of planning for many curricular areas, teachers rely on the services of professional librarians for important information. It is true that librarians have had professional training in the process of book selection and they also receive helpful book selection publications on a regular basis. It might be added, that the children's librarian's knowledge and experience should be more inclusive and varied in children's literature than that possible for most teachers in the classroom to have. However, this premise in no way negates the teacher's responsibility to know the elements that make up good literature; it merely stresses the fact that it behooves a teacher to join forces with librarians to deepen and to extend literature experiences for children.

The reliance of teachers on librarians as human resources in the process of getting acquainted with new books as well as in the selection of books for the read-aloud program, places a firm responsibility on those librarians to be actually knowledgeable about books and book aids and to see that recent books of excellence are available in the library. It is important that school librarians not function in the role of clerks or "keepers of the books," but as service-oriented professionals. They need to apprise teachers of the most recently acquired books by displaying, by advertising, and by circulating these books of distinction among teachers. The librarian can also conduct workshops for teachers. These in-service training sessions can include opportunities for teachers to become familiar with the latest acquisitions and they can provide opportunities for teachers of young children particularly to read some of the latest books during this time which their own schedule might otherwise not allow. The librarian may request that on occasion faculty meetings be held in the school library itself; this will permit the librarian to introduce new books and materials, and will also enable the librarian to become better known to the teachers as an important educational resource.

Librarians need to be informed about the educational opportunities in the community and to communicate this information to teachers, for today a librarian must function as a resource person in the broadest sense of the term, since resources extend far beyond the confines of the library or school. Even more, there needs to be a willing and free communication between all groups of academic professionals who are trying to provide the best for children. For as Sheila Egoff, a prominent Canadian librarian and critic of children's literature says: "A poor book takes the child and puts him back a step or two, a mediocre book takes the child and leaves him where he is. A good book promotes an awareness

of the possibilities of life, the universality of life, the awakening of response " (Egoff, 1973, p. 7).

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